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SUBJECT: ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS IN ARGENTINA BRINGS NEW RESOURCES,
CHALLENGES

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Argentine public is paying attention to environmental issues like never before, but measurable progress has been lacking to date. Argentina faces several major environmental challenges: overexploitation of its land resources, which leads to deforestation, desertification, and a loss of biodiversity; rapid urbanization, accompanied by increased pollution and the threat of climate change; and irresponsible use of its water resources, through overexploitation of fisheries and pollution of freshwater sources. The federal government has outlined ambitious new environmental plans, but some argue these have eroded the ability to deal with problems on the local and provincial level. Legislators have passed hundreds of environmental laws, but many of those laws are ill-conceived and few of them include provisions for implementation and enforcement. Protestors attract news by blocking bridges to Uruguay over the Botnia paper mill, but they reject most any report that says the mill is not polluting and neglect to protest very dirty mills further upstream and elsewhere in Argentina. Encouragingly, corporate social responsibility efforts and private sector conservation projects have achieved some real results. Major increases in tourist traffic, while presenting a new set of environmental challenges, have also occasioned new opportunities for sustainable development and environmental progress. End Summary.

EARTH, WIND, AND...WATER

¶2. (U) Argentina is so vast, and seems so empty, that it is almost surprising that the land is vulnerable to overexploitation. According to the NGO Vida Silvestre, the World Wildlife Fund's Argentine affiliate, more than 80% of Argentine territory is used for agriculture, animal husbandry, and forestry. Land conservation is consequently a key priority of environmentalists. Approximately 6.8% of Argentine territory is currently protected with an impressive system of national parks; however, 44% of protected areas are not monitored or controlled at all. Experts at a World Bank conference on sustainable development called Argentina a "green desert," acknowledging that overexploitation of the land is contributing to desertification in many areas. The survival of native forests is also a major concern, with deforestation occurring at a rate of approximately 250,000 hectares per year. Argentina's biodiversity is further threatened as many plant and animal species lose their native habitat.

¶3. (U) Argentina's air emissions remain low in comparison to other countries, but climate change has gained the attention of Argentina's scientists and environmentalists. Although Argentina may not be a major part of the problem, climate change could have devastating effects on Argentina. The western regions rely heavily

on snowmelt from the Andes to provide the water resources they need, while weather changes in the Rio de la Plata basin would likely contribute to an increase in natural disasters like floods. Argentine environmentalists are also conscious of the fact that Argentina's rapid urban expansion is contributing to a rise in pollution of all kinds, including emissions.

14. (U) Since Argentina's "fishery boom" in the 1990s, overexploitation of fisheries has seriously depleted ocean species such as hake, and freshwater species such as river herring. One of the starkest examples of the effect of pollution on freshwater resources is in the city of Buenos Aires, which is bisected by the Riachuelo River. Approximately 3.5 million people live in the river basin, but only 45% have sewers and only 65% have access to potable water. In addition, more than 800 factories dump their waste directly into the river.

PUBLIC AWARENESS OF ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES SOARS

15. (SBU) Environmental consciousness has been rising significantly among average Argentine citizens. A recent poll distributed to 8,000 Argentine youths through the collaborative efforts of several NGOs and government agencies found that the environment is the issue of greatest concern to young Argentines today. NGOs such as Greenpeace reportedly collected a million signatures on a petition presented to the Argentine Congress and led major rallies in late 2007 in support of legislation aimed at curtailing logging in native forests (which was passed). Argentines have clearly begun to worry about the environmental health of their homeland.

16. (SBU) In one of the most publicly visible environmental cases of the year, a protest movement has strongly objected to the construction of the Botnia pulp mill on the River Uruguay, alleging

it will cause environmental, olfactory, and visual pollution in what they contend is a sensitive ecological and tourist area. However, the environmental impact of the plant is controversial. Most analysts agree with the IFC's comprehensive cumulative impact study, reviewed by independent experts, which concludes that the mills "compare favorably with best available technology and best environmental practice for mills in Europe and North America" and that "there should be no significant deterioration in the air and water quality in the area." In fact, many observers predict that the Botnia plant will have a net positive effect on the cleanliness of the river -- in addition to scrubbing its own wastewater, the Botnia operator has reportedly offered to treat the wastewater of a nearby town, as well as waste products emanating from an existing pulp plant. There are currently ten Argentine paper mills operating with older and more polluting technology than that to be employed by Botnia.

17. (SBU) Comment: This relatively new public interest in environmental issues bodes well for Argentina's future. Although most Argentines have only superficial knowledge of environmental issues, they are beginning to pay attention. Grassroots efforts have focused attention on key environmental problems, such as deforestation. The downside of the new environmental buzz is an unfortunate tendency towards fear-mongering. NGO Vida Silvestre's Diego Moreno noted that the Argentine public is far more focused on negative issues -- pollution, contamination, and disaster -- than positive issues like conservation and biodiversity. The Botnia pulp mill protests are a perfect example of this phenomenon: the public's interest in preserving the river is positive, but both the methods of the protestors and their claims about the environmental impact of the mill are open to question, to say the least.

THE GOA EMBRACES A POPULAR ISSUE

18. (SBU) The 2006 appointment of the energetic Romina Picolotti as the Secretary of the Environment by Nestor Kirchner has given the Environment Secretariat a higher profile and more clout within the administration. Picolotti was a leading protestor of the Botnia pulp mill, and her appointment seemed to be the GOA's direct response to the public's fascination with the issue. With a larger

budget, the Environment Secretariat has increased the number of uniformed environmental inspectors from three to 250 during Picolotti's tenure. While this is an obvious improvement, these figures also show how far things have to go to reach an acceptable level of oversight in a country as large as Argentina. In addition, some observers believe that the higher profile of the Secretary of the Environment has resulted in an erosion of environmental authority on the provincial level. Sebastian Bigorito, President of the Argentine Business Council for Sustainable Development (CEADS), believes that the emphasis on federal solutions at the expense of local solutions has led to a "loss of institutional quality" at the local level.

¶9. (SBU) Environmental issues are "fashionable" among Argentine legislators at the moment, Bigorito told Emboff. But despite the huge increase in the number of environmental bills introduced in 2007 (approximately 350, compared with a few dozen five years ago), legislators have little knowledge of the issues at stake. "They believe that environmental problems can be legislated away," says Bigorito. However, the infrastructure for applying and enforcing most environmental laws does not exist. Monica Gabay, an official in the Forestry Bureau of the Secretary of the Environment, agreed that most such legislation has "no accountability" and little chance of effective implementation. The GOA and provinces took a real step forward in May with the creation of Argentina's first prosecutorial office dedicated to tackling cases of environmental crime (Reftel). Part of the prosecutors' mandate is to train provincial officials, very few of whom have had any experience fighting environmental crime. That office has only 18 prosecutors, and it has yet to secure a conviction, but it is a beginning.

PRIVATE SECTOR EFFORTS LEAD TO REAL GAINS

¶10. (SBU) Environmental developments in the private sector are more promising. An increasing number of companies -- especially large, international corporations -- have incorporated environmental and sustainable development commitments into their business models. American companies such as Dow, Dupont, Monsanto, Ford, and Unilever are all members of CEADS. That organization's president, Sebastian Bigorito, says that the "evolution" of environmental consciousness among many companies has led to greater "eco-efficiency" -- the

responsible use of natural resources -- among other positive measures.

¶11. (SBU) Private sector emphasis on environmental sustainability has also led to an increase in the number of students electing to specialize in environmental studies. Environmentally focused positions in NGOs, large corporations, and international organizations are coveted by young Argentines, according to Maria del Carmen Galloni, Director of Environmental Studies at UCES university. Galloni told Emboff that greater numbers of engineers, lawyers, and consultants of all kinds are enrolling in specialized environmental graduate and post-graduate programs at the university, and attributed the growth of the program to greater environmental awareness.

INCREASING TOURISM HAS A (MOSTLY) POSITIVE IMPACT

¶12. (SBU) Tourism in Argentina has skyrocketed in recent years, increasing 115% between 1990 and 2006. Eco-tourism is particularly popular. Secretary of Tourism Carlos Enrique Meyer noted that 34% of visitors to Argentina's national parks are foreigners. Although increased tourist traffic can put stress on delicate ecosystems, the tourism boom has had numerous positive results. The GOA has developed a Strategic National Plan for Sustainable Tourism, which includes provisions to increase protected land areas by 10% by 2015.

However, even the most famous tourist attractions remain vulnerable. For example, the international press recently reported that the famous Iguazu Falls area is being polluted by untreated wastewater that is dumped directly into the river.

¶13. (SBU) Tourism provides "an interesting opportunity" for conservation efforts, says Diego Moreno of Vida Silvestre. The fame

of national treasures like Perito Moreno Glacier and Iguazu Falls draws attention to important environmental issues and teaches Argentines to value their natural heritage. The burgeoning popularity of eco-tourism and adventure tourism has also allowed private land-owners to use their land in non-traditional ways. Tourist dollars (or euros) provide an incentive to preserve land for activities such as trekking, horse-back riding, rafting, hang-gliding, and guesthouses, rather than exploit the land for other types of economic gain.

COMMENT

¶14. (SBU) The current environmental situation in Argentina inspires both hope and frustration in the growing group of individuals who are paying attention. The most promising developments are the efforts of dedicated and knowledgeable NGOs and a growing environmental consciousness in the private sector. Frustrations arise from the extravagant but unimplemented environmental promises of legislators and the Secretary of Environment, which will likely remain unfulfilled unless the GOA develops mechanisms to enforce its laws and carry out its projects. Ultimately, if environmental issues continue to hold the attention of the average Argentine citizen, then the future of the environment in Argentina will look brighter.